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SUBJECT: INDIGENOUS RIGHTS SUPPLEMENT: RIGHTS TO LAND AND
BILINGUAL EDUCATION IN SALTA PROVINCE

SUMMARY

¶11. Argentina's Northwest province of Salta is undergoing a gradual economic transformation with prices for agricultural products, mining, oil up, and the tourism sector growing. Life, however, for the region's rural poor and indigenous communities remains difficult, characterized by high unemployment, low school retention, poor social infrastructure and urban migration. Lack of bilingual education and qualified teachers is a primary factor in low school retention among the indigenous communities, and the provincial government sale of traditionally indigenous lands has also been identified as a serious problem affecting these communities. The GOA has announced a national bilingual education program and education officials and non-governmental organizations remain committed to trying to address these issues. Given the complexity of the problems and the limited resources available, it may be too little too late.

END SUMMARY

THE SELLING OF INDIGENOUS LANDS

¶12. Political Intern traveled to Salta Province on August 6-7 to investigate indigenous education and property rights issues. She met with the Dean of the Universidad Nacional de Salta (UNSA) Stella Perez de Bianchi and professors of human rights and anthropology as well as the Secretary of Education Programming Professor Graciela Mohedas from the Education Ministry of Salta to discuss indigenous rights and the new bilingual program.

¶13. The GOA's July announcement of its new, national bilingual program coincided with the annual publishing of the International Work Group of Indigenous Affairs report in Denmark, which criticized the GOA for not respecting indigenous rights to property. On June 23, Salta Governor Juan Romero sold 16,227 hectares of land in the Pizarro Reserve inhabited by 85 Wichi and 35 Creoles (people of European or mixed descent) to soy farmers. The Dean of UNSA, Stella Perez de Bianchi, explained to the Argentine press that this land was part of the protected Chaco Forest. The Chaco forest is known to be the only dry forest found at such a high altitude. Due to deforestation, desertification is occurring at a rapid rate.

¶14. Yet, the environmental implications are not the only concern, since the lands are being taken away from indigenous communities such as the Wichi who have held claim to them for centuries. Salta is traditionally considered one of the most environmental-friendly provinces in Argentina. The provincial government of Salta has argued that the lands in question are of little resource value since they are in a state of environmental degradation. Secretary of Education Programming Prof. Graciela Mohedas confirmed this view, stating her belief that the indigenous communities have overworked the lands. Academics and international organizations share a different perspective.

¶15. Academics and international organizations are the primary defenders of indigenous rights to land in Argentina. For centuries, indigenes have lived off the lands and collected medicinal plants that are not found elsewhere. In 1994, the GOA invited academics to investigate how to resolve the sales of inhabited lands. UNSA provided a proposal, but the government has not acted on it. This year, the National Institute of Indigenous Issues (INAI) decided to reconsider the UNSA proposal. In July, professors from UNSA and the University of Buenos Aires sent a letter to the government of Salta saying that the sale of the protected lands is not only an environmental issue, but also affects the lives of the inhabitants forced to leave their homes. Academics are working with organizations such as Greenpeace and Conicet, the National Council of Scientific and Technical Investigations, to evaluate the consequences of the sales for indigenous as well as Creole communities. (Conicet has also expressed interest in contributing with the universities in strengthening the bilingual program).

A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

16. Both Creoles and indigenous groups inhabit lands sold by the Salta government. Creoles have tried to initiate negotiations with the government to little effect. From the indigenous perspective, local leaders do not traditionally negotiate, but rely on the support and intervention of international organizations such as Greenpeace. The cultural perspective is also rooted in collective rights; an entire indigenous community often claims the right to land. The Creoles, in contrast, maintain their individual claims to land. Therefore the sale of land among the Creoles and the indigenous communities are treated separately. Furthermore, the UNSA professors believe that the Wichi in Salta have virtually lost all claims to land. Social conflict between the indigenes and the government persists. In July, The Buenos Aires Herald suggested that the new bilingual program was announced to perhaps alleviate some of this tension.

BILINGUAL EDUCATION PROGRAM

17. The GOA announced the national bilingual program to improve the education of indigenous students at the primary level who live in remote towns and villages and are isolated from daily Spanish-contact. There are three kinds of public schools in Argentina: 1) schools with Creole students only; 2) schools with indigenous students only; 3) and schools with both Creole and indigenous students (mainly found in cities). The goal of this program is to institute bilingual instruction in at least 1,000 of the 2,500 indigenous schools and maintain the enrollment of the Wichi, Mapuche, Toba, Mocovi, Kolla, Guarani, and Pilaga students. The program is in effect for the first through third grades because most children have learned Spanish on their own by seventh grade. A bilingual program is already in effect in 107 schools in the provinces of Chaco, Formosa, and Salta, reaching out to 20,000 indigenous students.

18. The current bilingual program is limited by a lack of trained teachers. Instead, a translator with little or no formal education is in the classroom while another teacher instructs in Spanish. Scholarship and training programs will be provided for bilingual instructors to receive higher education and training and return to their native communities to teach.

19. Complicating the issue is the fact that the indigenous languages are not written languages, making it difficult to teach young children who have not had daily contact with Spanish how to read and write (in both Spanish and their local languages). Universities are working with the indigenous communities to transform the indigenous languages into written languages. This, however, is a long-term process, while each year there is more indigenous migration to the cities resulting in an urbanization and hispanization of the indigenous culture. Nevertheless, the universities remain committed to the bilingual program.

110. The UNSA representatives said that one of the faults of the bilingual program is that it will be implemented on a province-by-province basis. Although following national guidelines, each provincial Education Ministry will have different degrees of enforcement and success. The indigenous communities, however, are not neatly divided on a provincial basis. The Wichi, for example, live throughout Northwest Argentina. University experts are therefore concerned over the varying quality of education given by different provincial systems. Therefore, universities are going to coordinate with the provincial ministries in attempts to maintain a national standard of education.

111. Prof. Mohedas from the Salta Education Ministry assured the Pol Intern that the provincial ministries would maintain national standards. She said that she believes the education program has improved in Salta since the 2000 Social Plan. Before 2000, many schools were llanchos, adobe structures of the lower class found in Salta that had no running water or electricity. According to Mohedas, now the schools are made of good construction and include bathrooms and eating facilities. She also emphasized the 1995 law that made school mandatory up to ninth instead of seventh grade.

112. Prof. Mohedas was adamant that the provincial schools have improved. On August 7, the Pol Intern visited a school in the remote village of Alemania, Salta about 80 kilometers outside of Salta. Once a railroad track stop, Alemania now has several buildings where about ten families live. There is no electricity and no running water. There is a school where thirty children of mixed Spanish-indigenous descent are sent to live there with the teacher for four days a week. The living conditions are very grim and much still needs to be done.

POVERTY: THE CENTRAL FACTOR

113. In Salta, poverty is a key factor in both the selling of lands and the education program. In Oran, Salta, 80% of the population is unemployed. More and more indigenes choose to

migrate to the cities in search of work and to escape the poverty of their remote rural villages. Half of the indigenous population of Salta lives in urban areas. Up to ten percent of the national indigenous population is found in Buenos Aires.

COMMENT

¶14. In Salta, indigenous communities and other rural poor are being displaced through the sale of their land without negotiations between these communities and the provincial government. People are forced out of their ancestral lands into other lots or the cities. The indigenous communities are at a particular disadvantage because their leaders, culturally, are reluctant to negotiate directly with the government. Social inclusion of an isolated group of people involves communication from both sides. Yet, when the Creoles, usually more vocal in protecting their rights, have tried to negotiate, the provincial government tends to ignore their attempts.

¶15. Nevertheless, the GOA is making an effort to socially include the indigenous community through the bilingual program. The language issue is an interesting debate because with the urbanization of the indigenous community, the number of speakers of indigenous languages is decreasing, leading some to question the amount of long-term effort that should be put into transforming the languages into written form. It is a controversial issue concerning the maintenance of culture and heritage versus modernization and development.

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